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ABSTRACT

If educators, counselors, and student personnel workers are to provide services to students which would be perceived positively by various racial groups, an understanding of interracial perceptions and attitudes is extremely important. A study was conducted to examine the current state of interracial attitudes among students at the University of Maryland in College Park, and to determine whether or not th ere have been any changes in interracial attitudes and perceptions among black and white students since the 1970's. An anonymous questionnaire on interracial attitudes was completed by 437 college freshmen. Twelve percent of the sample were black; 88 percent were white. In general, it was found that whites and blacks who had racially isolated backgrounds seemed to have similar interracial attitudes, while blacks who had racially mixed experiences held different attitudes regarding interracial contact. Subjects who had little interracial contact in their pasts tended to report that minorities were treated no differently by the university than were white students. Blacks who had more interracial contact believed that minorities were treated differently by the university than were whites, and these subjects were more likely than racially homogeneous blacks to feel that the university did not foster respect for cultural differences. These findings suggest that intraracial differences may be more variable than interracial differences. (NB)

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Computer time for this study has been provided by the Computer Science Center of the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

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SUMMARY

The present study was designed to examine the current state of interracial attitudes among students, specifically, whether or not there have been any changes in interracial attitudes and perceptions among black and white students since the 1970's.

An anonymous questionnaire on interracial attitudes was administered to a sample of 437 students. In general, it was found that whites and blacks who had racially isolated backgrounds seemed to have similar interracial attitudes, while blacks who had racially mixed backgrounds held different attitudes regarding interracial contact. Results were discussed in terms of campus programming aimed at fostering respect for cultural diversity.

INTERRACIAL CONTACT, BACKGROUND AND ATTITUDES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CAMPUS PROGRAMS

The 1960's and 1970's were decades in which Americans attempted to solve many of the political problems caused by racial attitudes. Political, social and economic policies and programs were instituted to redress social inequality in various sectors of society. For example, the Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress to insure political participation by black Americans, while affirmative action programs were initiated in employment and higher education. Educators believed that interracial attitudes would be improved if members of different groups attended the same schools, e.g., if education were integrated. To this end, measures such as busing were implemented to insure racial balance in public schools.

These events and the increased awareness of tense race relations led social scientists to investigate interracial attitudes, perceptions and experiences. Studies which have examined racial attitudes and perceptions in educational settings (Amir, 1969; Brooks, Sedlacek, & Mindus, 1973; Merritt, Sedlacek and Brooks, 1977; Minatoya and Sedlacek, 1981; Patterson and Sedlacek 1984 ; Patterson, Sedlacek & Perry, 1984; Pettigrew, 1969) have generally concluded that racial/cultural groups react to and perceive their environments differently, and therefore have different interracial attitudes.

These differing perceptions and attitudes affect the manner in which racial groups relate to one another (Merritt, et al., 1977). The finding of differential perceptions of the socio-cultural environments suggests that educators, counselors, student personnel workers and researchers need to continue investigations which will aid in the delivery of student services. Moreover, if we are to provide services which would be perceived positively

by various racial groups, an understanding of interracial perceptions and attitudes is extremely important.

A number of variables which appear to be related to interracial interaction (e.g., familiarity, attraction, social perceptions, value systems, etc.) have been studied. Amir (1969), in a review of interracial contact studies, concluded that perceptions and attitudes were determined by the circumstances of the situation. Patterson and Sedlacek (1984) compared the perceptions and attitudes of minorities and found that Asians and Hispanics held attitudes more similar to one another than to those of blacks. The same study showed that Asians and Hispanics were more comfortable than blacks in interracial situations.

In a study of white attitudes toward blacks, Merritt et al. (1977) found that whites held negative attitudes toward blacks, especially in close interpersonal situations, where blacks might live near whites or date a friend or relative. Similar findings were obtained by Rodgers and Sedlacek (1979) and Johnson and Sedlacek (1979). In a study of white and black racial backgrounds, Minatoya and Sedlacek (1981) found that whites tended to come from higher socioeconomic levels, live and go to school in suburban neighborhoods, and had fewer close friends of another race. Blacks, on the other hand, came from a wide range of socioeconomic levels, lived in urban neighborhoods, and had more interracial contacts.

Some behavioral scientists feel we have solved race-related issues, and therefore we should move on to other topics and concerns. Have we solved racial problems? Have interracial attitudes and perceptions among blacks and whites changed since the 1970's? Are interracial attitudes different, given the measures taken to raise racial awareness and sensi-

tivity in institutions of higher education?

Martinez and Sedlacek (1982) provided evidence that interracial issues still may be important, since they found that blacks and whites had much different expectations of social norms on campus. Blacks tended to expect the climate to be liberal on political and societal issues, but conservative on personal issues such as drug use and cheating. White students, however, tended to perceive the socio-political climate as conservative, and expected more tolerance in personal-moral areas.

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether racial backgrounds and experiences are related to attitudes and interaction of students, and whether this relationship has changed over the past decade.

Method

An anonymous questionnaire on interracial attitudes was administered to a representative sample of 437 freshmen (12% black, 88% white; 52% male, 48% female) entering the University of Maryland, College Park, (UMCP). Data were analyzed by Chi square, analysis of variance, and Pearson Product Moment correlations. All reported results were significant at the .05 level.

Results

In general, it was found that whites, when asked about their family history in the United States, indicated fewer than five generations, whereas blacks reported having family histories in the U.S. beyond five generations. That is not surprising, given the large influx of European immigrants to the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. White students were more likely to have come from various regions of the country, to have lived in

racially homogeneous suburban areas (90-100% own race), and were more likely to have been raised by both parents. Blacks were more likely than whites to have been raised by a single parent, in a slightly more racially mixed (75-90% own race) urban neighborhood in New England, the midwest, and/or the southwest regions of the United States.

Inter-Group Attitides

Racial background was related to various interracial attitudes and behaviors. This analysis revealed that white students who lived in predominantly white neighborhoods also preferred socializing with members of their own race. "Socializing" as used here means preferring to have close friends of one's own race, and preferring to date people from one's own race.

When asked about the importance of culture, white students indicated that it was important to be aware of one's cultural heritage, and that the University fosters respect for culturally diverse groups. However, students seemed to feel that otherwise well-informed people knew little about their ethnic groups. Also, whites were more likely to agree that blacks and Asians were treated no differently than white students.

The same questions were asked of the black sample. The findings showed that blacks also preferred to socialize, i.e., date, members of their own race, and had more close friends of their own race.

Blacks who had homgeneous racial experiences (i.e., less interracial contact) tended to agree with white students that minorities were treated no differently by the university than were white students. Also, the same black students were more likely to believe that the university fostered respect for cultural differences. These findings suggest that racially homogeneous experiences for blacks and whites may be associated with similarity in interracial attitudes and behavior.

Intra-Group Attitudes

Blacks who reported having had racially heterogeneous experiences (i.e., more interracial contact) believed that minorities were treated differently than whites by the university. Also, blacks with more interracial experience were more likely to feel that the university did not foster respect for cultural differences. These findings suggest that intra-group differences may be more variable than inter-group differences.

Discussion

This study was conducted to explore several questions regarding the current state of interracial contact and attitudes among university students. Some of the issues and concerns addressed by this study were: (a) whether racial problems had been resolved; (b) whether interracial attitudes of blacks and whites have changed since the 1970's; (c) how attitudes have changed since the integration of higher educational institutions; (d) what effects do racial background and experience have on interracial attitudes and interactions?

The findings of this study appear to highlight several interesting aspects of interracial attitudes and contact. It appears that blacks and whites come to the university with distinctly different (although varied for each group) geographic, socio-economic and historical experiences. Blacks have longer family histories in the United States than do whites, as well as differing family histories, i.e., they came from urban, single parent homes, and from different regions of the United States than did whites. The finding of different social, political and historical experiences of blacks and whites is consistent with prior research discussed previously, which typically reports more differences than similarities between white and black college students (Brooks, Sedlacek & Mindus, 1973).

Inter-Group Attitudes

It appears that changes in white and black racial attitudes have occurred since the 1970's. Prior to the 1980's, studies typically reported polarized racial attitudes between blacks and whites (Triandis, 1976). The findings of similarities in attitudes reported in this study are striking when we consider that these findings were examined in light of earlier research studies conducted over ten years ago at the same university.

Some of the differences that were found in the present study were associated with socio-economic or socio-political circumstances (e.g., blacks residing in urban areas). It is not surprising that blacks experience more heterogeneous interracial contacts than whites, since blacks constitute a minority in the United States; although it appears that in spite of different socio-political experiences, whites and blacks who are isolated from one another develop similar interracial attitudes. In the present study, blacks and whites who reported few interracial contacts tended to believe that minorities are treated no differently than whites at the university, and exhibited preferences for their own racial group.

Intra-Group Attitudes

It should be noted that the black students in this study who reported racially mixed backgrounds and experiences expressed different attitudes than those who did not. Black attitudes and experiences differed depending on the degree and amount of their exposure to other racial/cultural groups. Variations in black interracial attitudes appeared to be related to whether or not blacks had close friends of another race/culture. Black students with little or no personal or intimate exposure to other racial/cultural groups held attitudes and perceptions of interracial contacts which were similar to attitudes and perceptions held by culturally encapsulated

white students. This finding, that homogeneous racial backgrounds and experiences are associated with similar interracial attitudes, while heterogeneous racial backgrounds (at least for blacks) are associated with different interracial attitudes, suggests that black and white students may come to the college or university exhibiting conformity with respect to their attitudes on a variety of topics which may affect their black-white interaction. For example, blacks and whites may agree that both groups should develop separate support systems within the institution. However, if the goal of the university or college is to promote diversity, then this isolation and separation may not be conducive to this goal.

It should be pointed out here that the interracial attitudes expressed in this study were from students who, given the integration of public schools in the United States, in all probability have had some opportunity for contact with other racial groups. Integration was embarked on with the assumption that contact among blacks and whites would allow them to know one another, and this knowledge would reduce racial prejudice and intergroup tension.

Amir (1969) noted that the literature on interracial contact suggested that, in and of itself, contact with other racial groups does not necessarily produce changes in attitudes. In fact, the type of change or the direction of attitude change depends on the conditions of contact. It is possible for interracial contact to increase prejudice and intergroup tension, particularly when the conditions of contact are "unfavorable." Amir further explained that there are favorable and unfavorable conditions under which interracial contact may occur. According to Amir, unfavorable conditions for interracial contact, i.e., conditions which tend to strengthen prejudice and interracial tension, are situations in which:

(a) the groups are in competition with one another (e.g., student organizations competing for funds); (b) involuntary, tense and unpleasant situations (e.g., arbitrary assignments of roommates of different groups); (c) when one group is perceived as having lower status in the situation (e.g, students think blacks are admitted with less ability); (d) when members of the group are in a state of frustration (i.e., recent defeats or failures, economic difficulties); (e) for minority or majority groups, when minority is of a lower status.

Favorable conditions, which have been found to reduce racial tensions, are: (a) where both groups have contact with one another and members have equal status (e.g., when blacks and whites work together on a student newspaper where both cover black and white issues rather than working on separate papers); (b) when minority group members have higher status than the majority group members in contact situations (i.e., on a college campus, where you have black or other minority faculty or administrators); (c) when an "authority figure" or the social climate are in favor of and promote intergroup contacts (graduate students, T.A.'s who are minorities, etc.); (d) when contact is intimate rather than casual (i.e., frequency, proximity and nature of contact); (e) when the intergroup contact is rewarding and gratifying); (f) when the members of both groups in the particular contact situation interact to promote important activities, or to develop some common goals, or goals which meet the objectives of both groups and are higher ranking in importance than the individual goals of either group.

The conditions described above suggest that when campus officials design programs aimed at creating a culturally diverse educational environment, it would be useful to incorporate favorable conditions in programming

cross-cultural experiences whenever possible. Perhaps reaching these goals and objectives would be more successful and rewarding if institutional programmers avoided unfavorable contact situations and incorporated more favorable contact situations in their planning.

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